

[REDACTED]
may 09, 1987

IRAN-IRAQ:

Increasing Danger to Persian Gulf Shipping

The danger in the Persian Gulf to maritime trade, including Soviet flag ships, and to oil facilities is growing. [REDACTED]

The Soviet merchant ship Ivan Koroteyev was attacked Wednesday in the lower Persian Gulf [REDACTED] Press reports say that Iran conducted the attack and that the Soviet ship is being repaired in Ad Dammam. According to sources of varying reliability, this week Iran also attacked two tankers with small boats that fired rocket-propelled grenades, and a third was attacked by an Iranian frigate that launched a variant of the Seakiller antiship missile but failed to hit the target [REDACTED]

Iraqi warplanes struck Iran's Sassan offshore oilfield Wednesday, according to shipping sources. Fears that Iran will retaliate by attacking Abu Dhabi's nearby Abu al Bukhush oilfield have prompted France to withdraw 75 expatriate workers, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The apparent Iranian decision to attack a Soviet merchant ship probably was made to underscore Tehran's dissatisfaction with the flow of Soviet arms to Iraq through Kuwait. Recently Iran's rhetoric has become increasingly harsh; Tehran publicly criticized the USSR on Thursday as the "main purveyor" of arms and equipment to Iraq. The attack was also probably intended to back up Tehran's warnings to the Gulf Arab states, particularly Kuwait, that superpower protection does not make them immune. [REDACTED]

The Soviets probably will protest strongly and may call for an international conference to end the war. They may also increase their naval presence in the Gulf beyond the destroyer and minesweeper now there, but the nearest Soviet combatants—other than two minesweepers—are at least a week away [REDACTED]

International shippers are likely to become more anxious, but unless either Iran or Iraq significantly increases its attacks, the movement of oil, arms, or other cargoes will probably change little. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It remains unclear whether the Iranian attackers, probably Revolutionary Guards, knew they were striking a Soviet ship and whether this action was approved by senior government officials. An officially sanctioned attack would underscore Iranian dissatisfaction with Moscow. However, the message from this strike is that a superpower flag alone will not provide protection and that ships in trade with Kuwait will require escort. This could lead to greater warship presence in the Gulf. Tehran has tried to avoid superpower involvement in the seven-year-old war. There is insufficient evidence to indicate that Tehran has changed this basic policy. [REDACTED]

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SEP 1999